

TRAVEL

Before enrolling kids in ski school, make sure the classes are small and fun is on the curriculum.



Dillon (center), 7, is ready for his ski lesson at Keystone Resort in Colorado. An enthusiastic young instructor can make all the difference.

Steve Haggerty
Photography / Colorworld

Higher learning

SKIING 2013-14

By Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty
FOR THE INQUIRER

PARK CITY, Utah — Hind-sight is always 20/20, especially when you're talking about teaching kids to ski. Like a lot of parents who love to ski, I figured I could teach my children myself. And I tried. But looking back now, I wish I'd put them in group lessons much sooner, when they were 6 or 7, blank slates waiting to be written on. It took me a while to realize that when your kids are skiing the slopes with an enthusiastic young instructor — slip-sliding through the trees, puffing fresh air, whooping and hollering and pretending small bumps are Olympic obstacles — they'll learn in a hurry, and they'll love it, too. As in any sport, an inspiring, encouraging coach and a week on the slopes See **SKI SCHOOL** on N5



Kids' ski school: Seek out small classes, and fun

SKI SCHOOL from N1 teamed up with other kids is a winning combination.

Later on, standing in line to enroll my 12-year-old, I discovered that for many parents, group lessons for kids have another benefit: It's as much about giving parents some much-needed time on their own as it is about keeping the kids happy and busy.

But some ski schools are better organized than others, and more successful, too. They don't take the easy way out, printing brochures, hiring instructors, and after that, winging it. They decide on a core mission, set specific goals, and write a plan to make it happen. So how does a parent find one of these top-rated ski schools?

With no classes to sit in on, textbooks to read, or lesson plans to review, you have to do some digging, comparing one method with another to see what works for your child. While there's no official ranking for children's ski programs, parents' comments, ski blogs, and websites offer a clue.

Here's how some of the most popular, and praised, ski schools succeed.

For Tom Pettigrew, director of skier services at **Park City Resort**, small classes are the single factor that sets the stage for successful group learning. "We keep our group lessons at five or fewer children, no exceptions.



Steamboat Resort, Colorado: Lessons more like an adventure. Steve Haggerty Photography / Colorworld

Ever," he says. "If we can't divide the kids evenly, we'll assign an instructor to three kids, or two, or even one," he says. "That way every child is guaranteed what amounts to a mini-private lesson and individual coaching."

The advantages are many, he believes. Small classes make it easy for instructors to get to know each child, and to earn that child's trust, essential for learning new skills in what is often a scary mountain setting. The kids will ski off the summit, cross steep slopes on a narrow cat-track, and snowplow in the trees. "Small classes are a no-brainer," Pettigrew says. "That's why college students who pick a small school with classes of 30 do better than they would

in a huge school with 400-seat lecture halls."

Small classes also mean more of them, which makes it easier to group together kids of similar ages, temperament, confidence levels, and ski skills. "Say that 100 kids have signed up," Pettigrew says. "With five in a class you'd have 20 possible groups. If the kids feel as if they're hanging out with friends, they'll have more fun."

How do group lessons compare with private lessons, generally considered by many parents, and skiers, as the gold standard?

"I never recommend private lessons for kids," says Nancy Gray, senior instructor at the top-ranked Ski & Snowboard Kids school at **Steamboat Resort**, in Steamboat Springs, Colo.

"Kids benefit from being with other kids," says Gray, now in her 40th year teaching children. "That's because they're much better at watching and copying each other than they are at listening to what an adult is telling them. It feels less like a lesson and more like an adventure."

Steamboat's class sizes are larger, from six or seven kids to as many as nine during holiday weeks. But Steamboat's instructors make a point of meeting and talking to each child ahead of time, to see what makes him or her tick. It helps them to assess each child, and put him or her with other similar kids.

"We sometimes divide them by boys and girls, because the kids themselves like it that way," Gray says.

Because many of the kids who enroll in Steamboat's programs are there for the week, with the same instructor nearly every day, Gray takes the long view. "I always remind parents who want to ski with their kids after class to stay on the same trails they skied in class, and not take them up to steeper, harder terrain. If the kids are afraid and they sit back on their skis — the hardest bad habit to break — the teacher has to start all over again the next day, to restore a sense of confidence."

At the Kids' Ski & Snowboard clinics at **Taos Ski Valley**, in Taos, N.M., it's the instructors who are at the heart of the program, according to marketing director Amanda Blake, whose grandfather, Ernie Blake, founded the famous Ernie Blake ski school. "The instructors are our greatest strength," she says. "Making sure the kids like what they're doing is the secret to our success. And that means hiring people who are kids at heart, people who want to get out there and play."

At Taos, whose offbeat Southwestern-alpine culture is unlike that at most other ski resorts, the kids' lessons aren't as formulaic as they are for adults. So when hiring for the children's programs, they look for people with enthusiastic, enterprising, even goofy

personalities, people with a knack for making lessons fun and interesting.

"We're a bit different from other places because Taos is a real town," Blake says. "Many of our employees live nearby, including 130 staff who've been here for 30 years."

The conclusion? Look for a kids' program with small classes, an emphasis on getting to know the kids, instructors who like being with children, and a belief that the lessons are as much about discovering a remarkable outdoor sport as they are about learning specific skills.

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